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This month's issue of *Scientific American* has oak trees on its cover. The cover story is all about oaks—their evolution, their importance, and their future. It's a good article filled with neat facts and solid science. Missing from it, however, is a fact I learned on a brisk night last October: oaks taste good.

Or at least their *acorns* do. For reasons that escape me I decided, earlier that October day, to try cooking with acorns. They're edible when properly prepared. A brief internet search yielded several acorn-related recipes, and I chose one for acornbread—the least complex choice, right in my (narrow) culinary comfort zone. I scrolled past a novel's worth of introductory text to get to the recipe itself. My cabinet and refrigerator had all the ingredients, minus the acorns.

Acorns are one of those things which you feel like you see everywhere, but which you can't find when you actually need them. At the time I had been living in Charleston for several months, and I had a few ideas of where I could find some healthy oak trees. My first try was the Kanawha State Forest, about 15 minutes from my apartment. The forest is beautiful and worth a visit for its own sake, but it had the added benefit of being large and remote. That meant I would encounter few, if any, people while searching for acorns. I didn't want to endure the strange looks or—worse yet—the questions about why I was picking a bunch of acorns up off the ground.

The state forest came up short. I found a few oaks, but most of the acorns were broken or partially decayed. Luckily, I had a backup plan: the Carriage Trail, a walking path through a forested park in my neighborhood. I had been there a few days before and knew of at least one oak with a fresh, abundant crop of acorns beneath it. Unluckily, however, the Carriage Trail is one of Charleston's most popular outdoors areas. People would see me, maybe lots of them. I decided to get in and out as quickly as I could to minimize the potential interactions. Plastic bag in hand I kept my eyes glued to the ground and picked up as many acorns as I thought I needed (it's a surprisingly hard thing to estimate). Several people passed by, surely forming all sorts of judgments about me, but none asked questions. I left and made it home unscathed.

By this point it was probably 8pm. For most foods, that would still leave plenty of time to prepare the recipe and enjoy the final product at a reasonable hour. But acorns are not most foods. They require, I would learn, a rather extensive preparation process before you can eat them. To avoid recreating the tedium here, I'll describe that process briefly.

First you must crack open every single acorn to get the "meat" located under the hard shell. I'm sure there are good tools for that, but I used a hammer and my kitchen counter. When all the meat is extracted and your thumbs are sufficiently bruised, it's time to leach out the tannins. Tannins are chemical compounds that make acorns taste bitter. Left in place, they can make you sick. To remove them, you place the acorn meat in boiling water. As the tannins come out, they turn the water dark brown, similar to the color of English breakfast tea. You repeat the boiling process with fresh water until the tannins are gone and the water no longer turns brown—about two to three cycles, according to the recipe. The acorns I used must have come from an exceptionally strong tree, because they required no less than *six* fresh pots of water before the

tannins were gone. If you've ever watched water boil six times in a row, you have a sense of what that was like.

Once the acorns were ready, the rest was downhill. The acornbread recipe included cornmeal and mashed sweet potatoes, plus the usual bread ingredients. I mixed it all together, poured the batter into a cast-iron skillet, and let it bake. 25 minutes later it was ready to eat, and I was ready to eat it. The bread was heavier and denser than any other I've had, but it tasted great. The acorns gave it a nutty, slightly bitter flavor. The clock was approaching 11pm. I was tired and happy.

There's no real moral to this story. But it's a story nonetheless, and a unique one at that—at least for me. I share it only to get your mind thinking about the odd, somewhat difficult, but ultimately fun things you might find yourself doing over the next year. West Virginia is a good place for that. At the very least, its residents will keep their judgments to themselves.

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